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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

W. Bertelsmann Verlag

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Federighi, P. (2011). Regional governments' institutional learning processes. In R. Arnold (Ed.), *Entgrenzungen des Lernens: Internationale Perspektiven für die Erwachsenenbildung* (pp. 15-30). Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann Verlag.

<https://doi.org/10.3278/14/1115w015>

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## Regional governments' institutional learning processes

**von:** Technische Universität Kaiserslautern (ZFUW / DISC) (Hg.)

**DOI:** 10.3278/14/1115w015

Erscheinungsjahr: 2011  
Seiten 15 - 30

**Schlagworte:** Adult Learning, Europa, Innovation, Lernprozess, Methoden, Politik

This essay is based on the findings from several research projects in which regional governments from all over Europe were directly involved. Keeping this background and some interpretation models from other research fields in mind, we will try to define some guidelines on how to manage methods and institutional learning processes involving regional governments.

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### Zitiervorschlag

Technische Universität Kaiserslautern (ZFUW / DISC) (Hg.): Regional governments' institutional learning processes. Bielefeld 2011. DOI: 10.3278/14/1115w015

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## Regional Governments' Institutional Learning Processes

### Introduction

Learning organization theories state and analyze learning phenomena in all kinds of organizations, public institutions included. Political science research – especially that devoted to federal states – offers a wide range of studies and interpretative models on institutional learning processes. After the European Lisbon Strategy was approved, Europe became a dynamic setting that helped enrich research in the field. That implied a commitment by political scientists to accompany the enlargement and inclusion process of new Member States with “learning processes” based on formalized methods – the so-called *Open Method of Coordination* (OMC).

Later, maybe too late, educational science researchers got involved in the field by promoting empirical research and methodological guidelines.

Learning is usually tied to the concept of people who acquire knowledge and skills to organise their life. The very simplest definition of learning is therefore also a humanistic definition: “Learning is the acquisition of knowledge and skills with the goal of a change in behaviour.” In particular in the past twenty years learning has been increasingly frequently linked to super-individual systems like companies, technologies and also regions (Nuijss in Federighi et al. 2007, p. 78).

The learning of regional governments occurs according to the institutional and effective competences pertaining to them, as part of their identity. This identity depends on the form of the state they are incorporated in. Three types may be distinguished:

1. *Federal* states, where “in practice it is not easy to distinguish the competences” among state and regions.
2. *Regionalized* states, where “some regions have legislative power, some others are limited to administration”.

3. In *unitary* states, “there exists only administrative self-government at provincial and local levels of government” (European University Institute 2008, p. 26).

In Southern Europe, local governments were subject to close control by the central government. In Northern Europe, there was a stronger tradition of local autonomy or self-government. This institutional factor is mitigated by other contextual components and actors (culture of power and democracy, economic frame, structure and organisation of regional governments, social actors, individual actors as politicians and civic servants), as well as by social conflicts.

The field of institutional learning is a wide one. Consequently, the analysis will only focus on the processes of policy learning and policy transfer related to interregional cooperation and on learning through inter-institutional networks.

This essay is based on the findings from several research projects in which regional governments from all over Europe were directly involved. Keeping this background and some interpretation models from other research fields in mind, we will try to define some guidelines on how to manage methods and institutional learning processes involving regional governments.

## **Institutional learning**

The first question to be addressed concerns the way in which regional governments learn or identify innovations to be introduced in their policies and how they build them into their compendia of knowledge – up until the point at which they may ultimately be adopted (see Federighi/Abreu/Nuissl 2007). Institutional learning is not exclusively connected to the moment of policy transfer, but especially in the case of autonomous policy-making, it comprises different moments. In a linear perspective, the learning process begins long before the occurrence of the transfer, and, clearly, proceeds in a range of forms in this phase as well.

To explain institutional policy learning, some researchers propose the socio-constructivist paradigm, according to which “learning is a way of

being in the world and not a way of coming to know about it” (Nedergaard 2005, p. 10). This approach has caused a number of authors to see the two moments of learning and transfer as a whole (see Stone 2000; Radaelli 2000). The approach is better justified if framed in cases of compulsory policy learning and transfer (e.g. in the case of EU policies related to the admission of new members into the Union). What actually happens here is that learning is revealed by the changes effectively introduced into commercial and social policies relating to human rights, for example.

In this respect it would appear more useful to refer to what is known as the “new institutionalism” (Radaelli 2000). New institutionalists

have adopted a processual perspective which goes beyond the mechanical transfer model. (...) This approach emphasises the aspects of political life, which are taken for granted where actors follow rules, shared interpretations, schema and meanings (Stone 2000, p. 3).

The concept of policy learning still needs to be examined in greater depth to better understand what it means when applied to a specific context. The term “learning” is not particularly clear when it is meant to refer primarily to the biological and cultural processes that take place in the individual in a training situation.

This is relevant to our area of study when we refer to the outcome of learning acquired by the individuals and institutions involved in policy innovation learning processes. As a consequence, I will assume a different perspective regarding the outcome achieved by individuals who took part in the process and will continue to enrich their personal knowledge – or the intangible background of knowledge possessed by the organizations. It is the perspective of the learning outcome acquired by the “regional institutions” which, however, only exist if translated into political decisions expressed in instruments of various kinds.

The processes which lead to (or accompany) the attainment of these learning results are made up of a series of educational and training actions explicitly aimed at and structured by the fulfilment of predetermined learning objectives or of actions of an informal nature, simply entrusted to the dynamics of political interaction. As a consequence, the purpose

of policy learning (and the detailed model to be constructed) does not comprise individual learning, but educational and training actions whereby the in-situations acquire ideas while they are being translated into political action.

## **Policy learning as part of innovative institutional dynamics**

The concept of innovation implies overcoming and further developing pre-existing know-how with regard to the various types of education activity (systemic or didactic).

To understand the dynamics that accompany the transfer processes, however, two further specifications are required with regard to the innovation phenomenon. Transfer requires that the outcome be adopted by others and through policy learning.

Firstly, considering innovation transfer, what is being referred to are the processes of external innovation. These processes must be identified and understood. In these processes, external agents play the role of creators of some sort of innovation (process, product, organisation, marketing, etc.). External innovation, however, cannot exist independently from the dynamics of internal innovation. External innovation is complementary to internal innovation. Innovation processes are developed in every organization by managing the improvement of the quality of the goods and services produced. These processes involve the entire group of innovators of an organization.

Internal innovation is strongly fostered by tacit knowledge possessed by each organization and can result in forms of “tacit innovation” (Tudor 2001). In this context, the term “soft innovation” is also used. Soft innovation is based on the clever, insightful, useful ideas that just anyone in the organisation can think up (see Leonard/Sensiper 1998). The transfer of innovation must be seen and interpreted according to a direct connection between both the internal and external dimensions.

Secondly, innovations pertaining to the micro and meso levels must be included in the ecosystem design as well, precisely in their relations to the set of places and processes that produce economic and social learning, and

in their relations to the development in the institutional context considered. This means taking into consideration the fact that

environments that favour interactive and cooperative processes of learning and innovation offer better conditions for competitiveness and for socioeconomic development. A complex ensemble of institutions, customs and social relations thus assumes a new role as their density is seen as stimulating processes of growth and change. (...) Innovation is stimulated by a recombination of the different knowledge bases, in a process of mutual learning (Maciel/Albagli 2007).

In our case, the proximity factor must be considered both in its local dimension and in reference to the virtual space traced by the transnational networks through which ideas and products flow.

## **Communities of policy learning**

Potential reciprocity is the fundamental precondition for transfer. The problems tied to transfer in industrial or commercial policies vary.

The absence of direct processes of industrialization or commercialization on a large scale leaves products and their use at a permanent prototype level, conceived in precise contexts. Policy learning objects can only be developed through their adoption and their transfer on behalf of other users. It is the subsequent user who will fine-tune the product and will prepare it for its next stage of development.

The systems of education and training are widely composed of lead users – that is, actors who, whenever possible, produce their own policy tools from whatever they have available. As lead users, these are not individuals looking for standard products, but on the contrary, people with a predisposition to manage themselves – in other words, to adapt the results to their needs. These are individuals open to processes of product innovation, and willing to become an active part in these processes of inspiration or adaptation.

This phenomenon is not new and does not only pertain to the field of education and training.

Users of products and services – both firms and individual consumers – are increasingly able to innovate for themselves. (...) Users that innovate can develop exactly what they want, rather than relying on manufacturers to act as their (often very imperfect) agents. Moreover, individual users do not have to develop everything they need on their own: they can benefit from innovations developed and freely shared by others (von Hippel 2005, p. 2).

The conscious position held by the lead users, open to innovation, goes together with their predisposition to share the results they have obtained and the innovations they have implemented. The extent to which results are shared may vary, depending to whether we are looking at individuals belonging to the public training system or to the private one (where competition is more intense). Nevertheless, the effort in innovation is complementary to a willingness to share results and to search for mutual benefits in order to strengthen one's own reputation in the network of knowledge exchange that one belongs to.

This confirms what has already been verified by von Hippel regarding the importance of belonging to innovation communities:

Innovation by users tends to be widely distributed rather than concentrated among just a very few very innovative users. As a result, it is important for user-innovators to find ways to combine and leverage their efforts. Users achieve this by engaging in many forms of cooperation. Direct, informal user-to-user cooperation (assisting others to innovate, answering questions etc. (ibid., p. 11).

More precisely, aside from belonging to innovation communities (institutional, professional, sector-based, etc.), belonging to a specific type of community seems more significant: a community in which information on the innovations introduced and the results obtained circulates in an organised manner, and where the access to and the use of the products are favoured by cooperative relations. The specificity of the community lies in the fact that the object of exchange is innovative policy ideas and products.



## The policy learning method

The problem arising from the policy learning method immediately reveals a two-fold requirement: on the one hand, the need to adopt an open approach to the quest (rather than search), and on the other, the need to guarantee a device that allows for communicating, collecting, and organizing the results of the use for political action.

The initial methodological orientation is a response to the fact that policy learning appears as a study that has been thoroughly completed: the understanding of how to improve one's own performance. In these cases, what prevails in the final analysis is a kind of "methodological opportunism (which) selects constructional tests that fit specific analysis, and ignores the evidence that can be provided by using other criteria that do not match the expectations of the analyst" (Croft 2001, p. 45). The policy-making players who form a part of the network for the purpose of understanding which ideas and which policies are worthy of consideration are not concerned with the formal coherence of their procedure, nor can they be constrained to operate within such a method, even if it is seen as the most suitable with regard to the subject.

In our case it is the nature of policy learning – autonomous, voluntary, and highly suited to the action – which inevitably relegates it to the realm of methodological opportunism, where – given any standard whatsoever, however "basic" or "necessary" it may be for science – circumstances will always arise in which it is convenient not only to ignore the standard, but to adopt its opposite (see Feyerabend 1975).

The methodological orientation serves to offset the uncertainties of methodological opportunism via the definition of shared methods and instruments in the support of co-operative and transformational learning.

The starting point is the adoption of the *Open Method of Coordination* (OMC), launched at the Luxemburg Council and confirmed at the Lisbon Council. Created without centralized supranational governance, the OMC is designed to enable European politics to effectively deal with strong national diversity (see Commission of the European Communities 2002, p. 20).

## **Policy learning and transfer in regional lifelong learning policies**

The OMC was defined by the Portuguese Presidency in its conclusions from the European Council as a method involving a specific set of elements:

- fixing guidelines for the European Union combined with specific time-tables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long term;
- establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practises;
- translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences;
- periodical monitoring, evaluation and peer review organised as mutual learning processes (European Council, Presidency Conclusions 2000, § 37).

As de la Porte Pochet and Room (2001) claim:

The OMC can be characterised as a “post-regulatory” approach to governance, in which there is a preference for procedures or general standards with wide margins for variation, rather than detailed and non-flexible (legally binding) rules (p. 302).

The establishment of the OMC is based on the practice of benchmarking, peer review, cyclical follow-up of results, and built-in feed-back mechanisms.

Bulmer and Radaelli, researchers who contributed to the development of this concept and the OMC model, locate the model in the framework of the process of “Europeanization”, guided by “soft law relating to rules of conduct that are not legally enforceable but none the less have a legal scope in that they guide the conduct of the institutions, the member states, and other policy participants”, and which advance a much more voluntary and non-hierarchical process (Bulmer/Radaelli 2004, p. 7). The comparison

offered by the authors with other models of governance shows how the OMC is characterized by its orientation towards coordination, policy exchange, and the adoption of horizontal relationship methods.

However, the adoption of the OMC in intra-regional cooperation and policy learning cannot be reduced to mere transposition. The initial problem derives from the fact that the way in which OMC is currently being developed is connected to experiments mainly involving the national levels, thus excluding regional governments in particular from the field of lifelong learning, and including actual decision-makers only in rare cases. This has certainly pushed it further towards a technicist direction.

## **Historical lifelong learning challenges and policy learning**

Policy learning and transfer happen within a historical context and against the backdrop of strategic challenges asking for important, paradigmatic reforms. They are also deeply influenced by a low propensity for change in the field of learning policy (lower and weaker than in other systems such as health, social security, transport, etc.).

Let's take as acceptable the following brief overview of current challenges in lifelong learning in order to overcome the crisis of education and training models. In the past, education and training systems were used to create a feeling of belonging to the state and to the nation, to ensure social reproduction, and to guarantee sufficient competence supply. Today the model is still the same. However, its relation to the political discourse on competences has weakened the idea of education, and the effects of their mismatch have worsened due to the fact that social reproduction functions lead to the loss of potential talents. This has meant questioning public strategies of education and training, entrusting families and companies with the task of providing further training for citizens, both employed and unemployed.

Countless contradictions emphasize the crisis of existing strategies and models. We live in a society where professional maturity is reached too late, and where work is stopped too early. European education and training systems produce no less than 30 per cent of dropouts and low-skilled workers. These are people, in other words, whose personal and

professional growth depends only on job quality and the social networks they belong to. Companies hire people who may have 20 or more years of training, but who need many more years before they reach the level required. This may be the reason why staff turnover is high: in a few dynamic European private companies, it is above eight years (in the United States, it is even lower).

When public policies invented European education and training systems, they were designed to be separate from the world of work. At the same time, we invented the idea of “youth”, meaning individuals who must live as consumers and who do not need to contribute to demographic growth.

Today, this separation is mitigated by a few corrective measures, which to date have produced only limited effects. Nevertheless, our societies avail themselves of excellent specialists, including armies of business people and managers. When young people enter the working world, their training is entrusted to these people. Specialists, business people, managers, and bosses are certainly competent here, but we are not equally certain that they know how to help the people working for them grow. This is because those who possess the knowledge do not know how to teach, and those who do know how to teach are not in the right place.

All of this leads to an enormous waste of human potential, creating serious economic and social damage. This is why we need a lifelong learning strategy that is capable of transforming living and working places into training places. Science can help overcome this situation if researchers know how to provide answers to the following needs:

1. Provide transparency; describe and measure not just what someone has learned, but above all predict what a person will know how to do;
2. Reform education and training systems (not just school and university) integrating job places (not just for young people), guaranteeing their educational quality;
3. Build a large team of specialists, business people, and managers who know how to develop the people working with them: leadership is not an art, it is the conscious management of everything that trains a person;
4. Give more responsibility and power to individuals in making their own decisions on how their training should be done.

Finally, the question is: can the OMC facilitate policy learning and/or transfer processes related to these challenges? The provisional answer is: only in part. For it does not correspond fully to the process of policy learning (and less to policy transfer). To facilitate policy learning and transfer, the OMC should become simplified and sensitive to institutional learning and decision-making processes.

## **Beyond a linear interpretation**

The institutional policy learning process is far from being linear and close to being continuously affected by *karstic* dynamics – like a river disappearing in subterranean limestone caverns to appear again after a while.

There is a huge amount of evidence confirming the weakness, for instance, of the current school paradigm. This evidence notwithstanding, only a few governments have been able to adopt and progressively implement an adequate reform process. The most dynamic governments started more than two decades ago, but they are still on the way.

That process is not rational; it is neither based on the simple accumulation of evidence and knowledge, nor on an analysis of needs and demands. The process is mainly affected by institutional behaviour, determined by cultural and sustainability factors, including all consensus components; it just works like a typical learning process.

Seen within this context, the OMC, as a method, represents an organizational characteristic to process inter-institutional learning. But it does not correspond to the policy learning process of an institution such as a regional government. This means that we have to look for theories that help us explain and manage such dynamics in order to incorporate them into our institutional learning theory. Here, we would like to mention the “punctuated-equilibrium theory”. It may help explain the complexity (or the non-linearity) of the policy learning processes of regional governments. It also helps us understand how it happens that the institutional system of government organizations and rules produces both a plethora of small accommodations and radical changes.

Punctuated-equilibrium theory seeks to explain a simple observation: political processes are generally characterised by stability and incrementalism, but occasionally they produce large-scale departures from the past. Stasis, rather than crisis, typically characterises most policy areas, but crises do occur. Large-scale changes in public policies are constantly occurring in one area or another (...). While both stability and change are important elements of the policy process, most policy models have been designed to explain, or at least have been most successful at explaining, either the stability or the change. Punctuated-equilibrium theory encompasses both (True/Jones/Baumgartner 2007, p. 97).

Punctuated-equilibrium theory places “the policy process on a dual foundation of political institutions and bounded rational decision-making” (True/Jones/Baumgartner 2007, p. 1).

The term “bounded rationality” stresses the fact that individuals are limited by the information they have, the cognitive limitations of their minds, and the finite amount of time they have to make decisions. But this dimension alone could only explain the progressive evolution of policies based on a continuous incrementation of information (the so-called incrementalism theory) and not the *karstic* spans.

Neither incrementalism nor globally rational theories of preference maximisation fit well with the joint observations of stasis and dramatic change that are the dual foci of the punctuated-equilibrium approach. However, if we add the simple observation that attention spans are limited in governments just as they are in people, then we have a theory of decision making that is consistent with punctuated-equilibrium theory and with what is actually observed. Since agenda-setting theory always rested on such a decision making foundation, punctuated-equilibrium theory simply extends current agenda-setting theories to deal with both policy stasis, or incrementalism, and policy punctuations (True/Jones/Baumgartner 2007, p. 6).

For our object of study, the fundamental consequence affects the feasibility of a learning process. The basic condition is represented by the need that the issue is already a part of priorities and of the agenda of the regional governments involved. It is the starting point for a learning process that individuals (policy makers, civil servants, and other key players) will affect organizational learning.

## **A methodological proposal for transregional policy learning**

We will conclude with a provisional proposal for a design capable of supporting a process of institutional policy learning among regional governments, focused solely on mutual learning. The proposal is based on the experience accumulated, over the past decade, by several regional governments in various European countries.

Models to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of international cooperation must be adopted because in order to achieve common goals, multilevel governance must be established on reciprocal loyalty between all levels of government and between institutions. (...) good cooperation between the various levels of political power and the institutions is absolutely vital; it has to be based on trust, rather than on confrontation between the different legitimate political and democratic roles (Committee of the Regions 2009, p. 10f).

Regional governments cooperate in order to reinforce economic and societal internationalization through their policies. In addition, they cooperate to establish policy decisions on the evidence produced from experience elsewhere. Greater relevance of decisions taken and better results can be guaranteed by being open to comparing and transferring new ideas, procedures, and instruments.

Cooperation and mutual learning between regional governments being monitored has already been established on the following principles:

1. Cooperation must adapt to the dynamics that accompany the political and decisional processes of each individual regional government. These dynamics are characterized by phases of hard innovation produced by deep reforms, alternating with moments of soft innovation, that is, the slow progressive accumulation of perfecting practices. This is why cooperation must be open to synchronous as well as asynchronous procedures. Each regional government must find a response to its improvement demands through cooperation in its priority times and topics.
2. Policy learning processes must be activated in response to the demand of each regional government and not just when there are initiatives linked to common interest goals.

3. The quality of cooperation between regional governments depends on the constant commitment to building an organized area of mutual learning that fosters the encounter between demand and supply of cooperation between regional governments.
4. This means building and maintaining stable relationship channels, using a European-wide network of services that
  - guarantees communication between potential institutional partners,
  - guarantees regular, recurrent flows of exchange of information about new ideas, current challenges, and successful cases, and
  - takes on the commitment of progressing towards a quantitative type of interregional benchmarking.

All regional governments are a source of knowledge and experience. The quality of the policy learning offer that each regional government can grant at an international level depends on the existence of intelligent (i.e. evidence-based) policies. Such policies need to be documented and evaluated in their processes, results, and, if possible, their impact. Furthermore, the quality of learning depends on an institution's willingness to establish international collaborative relationships, and on the possibility to activate the necessary resources.

When regional governments accept policy and mutual learning demands, they guarantee their partners the most suitable level of policy interaction and the necessary technical contribution in terms of access to information and relationships with stakeholders. Understanding the differences and specific aspects of each partner means that they can all surpass the national cultural filters that obstruct policy learning in an international dimension.

All regional governments have reasons to use international cooperation in order to improve their policies, whether they are connected to managing regional development or international dimensions. For this commitment to produce added value, the demand for cooperation must correspond to a solid need for improvement and change, supported by an explicit institutional choice. For the regional government, this is the condition for expected improvement to be achieved in the short and medium term, and for a demand for cooperation that can generate satisfactory results for all of its partners. Before making any proposal for cooperation, the regional governments give



a quality guarantee to their partners, specifying and guaranteeing solid local foundations to their policy learning demand. Such an agreement must be the product of a consultation process between all the key actors involved. It is accompanied by the proposal of the appropriate actors according to the type of policy selected and the responsibilities involved, depending on the results that are expected. The guarantee for policy learning quality depends on the preliminary commitment in work aimed at overcoming the various types of cultural filters that hinder mutual understanding and arise from the diversity of ideas, concepts, and practices.

Initiating a policy learning process between regional governments potentially produces further needs for investigating and developing relationships. Therefore, a further preliminary condition of quality and success is formed by demonstrating the capability to activate the resources necessary for potential developments and the availability of reinforced bilateral and multilateral cooperation in mutual learning prospects.

The internationalization of job markets and training and productive systems is accompanied by regional governments with concerted actions of common interest aimed at creating infrastructures, services, or initiatives of reciprocal interest. This can concern the mobility of citizens in terms of training, work, or business, as well as the coordinated production of training offers or other joint ventures.

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